A Letter addressed to all those who participated in the Sevapuri meeting to consider Role and Training of Development Activists

It would not be wrong to say that all of us felt disappointed and frustrated at the end of our Sevapuri meeting. We did try to analyse our failure in smaller groups both while the meeting was going on and afterwards. It would have been good if we had done it together. Unfortunately, some of us had to leave earlier and this was not possible.

It would be wrong to treat our failure lightly. Ours was a small group and many knew each other already and yet we failed in communi- cation. I have thought it would be a good thing for me to try to share with all of you my own reading of it. I find that there will not be peace of mind unless I do it. I am doing this hoping it will bring me closer to all of you.

I came to Sevapuri with the heightened expectation of being subjected to severe criticism and that too from the Marxist stand point. I sincerely welcomed it, though there was all likelihood in the process I shall be found wanting in many respects. When Kamla and Abha and I were drawing up a list of participants for the meeting I had put down names of Kumar Shikalkar, Sandeep Pendse, Sudhir Bedekar, Pradip Prabhu and Datta Savale, with the express purpose of inviting unsparing criticism from the Marxist standpoint. Later on I added 2 more names these of Ashok Manohar and Anant Phadke, both Marxist activists. I could have easily put down names of more 'favourably inclined' persons, but did not, because the purpose was to get criticized so that one could make one's approach and method and position more wholesome.

I was aware that the approach, position and method emerging out of the Bangalore Report would not be readily acceptable from Marxist stand point. It would look more like rejection of Marx, whereas for all of us in Bangalore - excluding those who left in the middle we were building further on Marx, freeing ourselves of the rigidities.

On the morning of the 8th we did start with Juyal making his points. Reflecting back on it I feel that it was unfortunate that he made his point in too short a manner while all of us were expecting a detailed criticism with substantiation. This was not beyond him, but somehow he was even shorter than his prepared note. Issue could not be joined with his points. It was unfortunate for him to use the expression "subterraneanly anti-Marxist". This had a peculiar effect, I now think. These from the Bangalore seminar had not experienced the discussions at Bangalore as anything anti-Marxist, and had not got this impression when they had read the report in draft stage. They were taken aback, bewildered, not a little embarɛassed, Personally I did not mind the Report being called that, because I am too familiar with this kind of reaction to me and my views as a starting point. The misunderstanding would get cleared only when the debate was joined. But I observed that some others withdrew: may be, they said to themselves, how could one meaningfully communicate with those who find anti-Marxism in this report?

Kamla and me (and possibly Abha) reacted/responded in a slightly different manner. We felt that there was a danger that a lot of time would be spent on pointing out bits from the Report which were 'anti-Marxist', thus giving the Report too much importance. We felt that none of the Bangalore

group intended it to be anything but a kind of Marxist document, but, well, there could be some statements, which, when taken in isolation, did sound anti-Marxist. But we were not there to depend every word and line in the Report, but to improve upon it together. In order that the discussion should not get bogged down into the body of the Report we suggested that, if the Report was deemed so unsatisfactory it could even be totally dropped and we could take up the theme afresh.

This was completely misunderstood. Many felt that we from Bangalore were people either without serious commitment and unwilling to stand by our views or that the Report was a manipulated fraud and hence we were trying to wriggle out of it. This misunderstanding persisted even at the end to a large extent with some.

At one point on the 8th, sending that some of us felt the need of going into the Report and making a critique I suggested that Dunu present me. A critique that Dunu had in mind implies merciless exposure point by point of the Report, laying bare the implied philo- sophical and ideological postulates and positions. I awaited it holding my breath. The debate was being joined at the level of high theory and it would probably take all the rest of the time, I thought. But then Dunu did not present one and we were immediately back at square one.

The Bangalore Report was not an exercise in theory, as Pradip pointed out, who, incidentally, is strong on theory, and I did not feel like taking up his remark on the Report that there was nothing there to develop a critique of. But when there was a repeated suggestion that we in Bangalore did not understand that in order to undertake training one needs a theory of society, I could not contain myself and intervened in a manner which did not help further discussion or dialogue. Many of us had such outbursts which made it difficult to clear up misunderstandings.

Sorting out "ideological" positions or "theories of society" necessarily means settling finer points of theory. Even amongst those who belong to tradition, say Marxist or Sarvodaya, it always takes a long time even come to decide upon areas of agreement and disagreement, and inevitably words need to be clarified and defined precisely at every step. It is easy only when all present are happy to call themselves as Marxists or Sarvodayass without trying to find out if one's understanding is really the same, or if one has over years settled major and minor points of theory through discussions and come to an almost identical understanding. When a group gathers which is not in either of the two positions it has to take many things for granted, which means that things are put in a rather fizzy or vague fashion, broadly. And then take up a few points in a limited time. That is to proceed empirically (empirical is different from expricism). Datta tried to take this course, but he could not take the "critics" with him, even though there was no doubt that he stood with them.

Even if we had accepted Datta's suggestion we would have been criticising and laying bare the underlying assumptions, premises, perspectives,etc. The question is why did he not get support? Was it because some of us were more keen to characterize the document as a whole and the group who produced the document? Specially Dunu, Vikas and Juyal might give a thought to this.

At some point Pradip brought the fact of non-participation by many to our notice. In the end we did not take it seriously. Groups like ours usually divide into two. There are a few who are interested in

discussion of theoretical points in highly abstract fashion. The others are not at home in that kind of a rarefied atmosphere. There is a high drop out rate. We could have resolved this only by bringing points of theory into the ambit of experiences of the members of the group. Take 'class' as an example. One can either go into a theore- tical discussion as to how a class is defined and why so, or one can attempt to make the definition referring to what one observes around oneself. Many of the participants had rich practical experience, but it was never brought into focus and use. The result was they became spectators to a wrangle between a few of us as to how the match was to be played out.

In retorspect, I also feel now that it might have been better if the critics had joined issue with me straightaway. It had become clear that although all of us were Marxists of one kind or another, we did not have identical views and the use of phrases like 'Marxis method', 'Marxist categories', did not lead to easy acceptance. There were many who were resisting this by their silence and/or non-participation. Whereas I was outspoken from the beginning. So, attack on the Bangalore Report had also to be directed against me. I think it was on the 8th itself during lunch that I made my position clear to Dunu. I was prepared to stand up and be counted, I was willing to argue out any question that was raised. But I was reluctant for it to happen for only one reason. The meeting would then turn into a kind of trial. Instead of that happening it was any time better that the group as a whole conducted a dialogue.

In the end we came to discuss mainly two issues. 'Who can be called an activist?' and 'Should the training be directive or not?' Some of us were insistent that only someone who is wedded to Marxism can be accepted as an activist. Agreement to such a proposition can be secured only in a group which agrees not to or does not feel the need to spell out "wedded to Marxism" part of it. I had and still have three objections to accepting this kind of a proposition.

(i) I find that in practice there are many individuals and groups who are involved in actions, in mobilisation, in struggle to create a new social order and yet who are not Marxists.

(ii) Even at the level of theory it does not seem necessary or right or valid to make this kind of a definition.

(iii) Even taking one's stand on Marx one cannot assume identical interpretation. Within Marxist tradition there are many strands and one needs to go into the details, as the diffe- rences are quite vital.

Only to illustrate the last point: even at Sevapuri among those of us who were avowedly Marxists (Dunu, Juyal, Vikas, Pradip, Datta, Prabalan, Ramdas and others) one could at least make 4 sub-groups.

If we wish the movement for creating a new social order to be a mass movement or a class movement broad enough to involve crores of people then the definition of an activist will have to be also broad enough to include a whole continuum-the kind of continuum we had at Sevapuri.

The second point was about being or not being directive. After the long exchange between me and Dunu may be the differences are not too great. Taking Datta's formulation as given that 'objectively the next recessary stage is that of a socialist society' the point remains whether this critical

understanding has to come to persons out of their own action-reflection.Theorization process or is it to be given them in a capsule form? If we say that a person should come to understand reality out of his own action-reflection-theori- zation process then a person undertaking training is placed under a constraint. The constraint is that he facilitates, accelerates, initiates the process of reflection-theorization process, that he helps those whom he trains to come face to face with reality and they trusts that when hel does that will come to a similar understanding as he himself. He can take one further step. He can together with the trainees enter into a dialogue and an exploration of the reality afresh each time thereby bettering his own understanding. educator, teacher or trainer he cannot overstep this constraint.

Acceptance of this constraint when one is fulfilling the role of an educator is not a neutral position. Method is not a technique, the goal is immanent in the method, because method is a part of the process about which Datta and Pradip talked. This constraint is essential and necessary if the goal of all our actions is to realise/ actualize the humanness of human beings, which is related to his role as a subject of his history/destiny and his creativity.

It looks to me that many of us were mixing up two roles. An activist going into action with other activists as a group and an activist acting as an educator within his own group or in relation to others. In practice the same person can and has to play both these roles.

The role of an educator begins at the point where an action is #codified" (in the sense of Friere) as the starting point of a process of reflection-theorization. Codification has the constraint of being truthful to the facts, truthfulness as required by a scientist. In the role of an educator the activist has the responsibility of being open-minded about his own convictions/ strategies/ understandings/ theories, etc. each time.

The other role of an activist needs suspension of such open-mindedness at the moment decision is made as to any particular action to be undertaken. One acts on the basis of one's convictions, etc. at the moment, taking them as final for the moment. In the course of action the role of an activist is very much 'directive' (but should not be manipulative/oppressive) one.

Can one successfully combine these two roles? I think that to be really creative and scientific every activist has to combine these two in terms of himself, i.e., he has to continuously play the role of an educator in his own context, if not in relation to others.

Some of us were meeting each other for the first time and were strangers, We talked at some length about ourselves and that brought us together, but the discord and misunderstandings in the sessions created a gap again. Our prejudices were strengthened, mistrust continued, and we pasted without becoming friends, Usually in such small groups one befriends all without necessarily coming to think or be alike.

Personally I do not think it right to let matters rest here, being either cynical or casual about it. I, for one, would be happy to continue debate/dialogue with my critics, either through correspondence or, better, through further gatherings.

I would be happy to know what others think, and invite them to respond to this communication on my part.